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Ephesians 2:4-6

Ephesians: God Came Here

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There are two words at the beginning of this passage that are important for us, especially after the last two sermons on Ephesians. If you weren't here for both or can't remember sermons all that well, then I encourage you to get copies of both and read them in order. In those sermons we looked together at the opening verses of chapter two to see what the condition of humanity is, as God sees us. The two sermons represent an accurate but gloomy picture. So today we come to some good news. The first of the two words that are important here is 'But' and the second important word is 'God.' The RSV (the Revised Standard Version, the one you currently have in the pews), begins verse 4 with these two words - 'But God ….' The beginning of Paul's answer to the gloom of our human condition is to not let us forget that we are not alone in all of this, that someone else has something important to say.

I haven't often wondered about this, but in preparing for this sermon I came across the question: what would life be like if God suddenly ceased his redemptive processes among us? I wonder if there wouldn't be mass suicides all over the earth because every bit of glory would be removed from life, every bit of joy, every bit of gladness, all those moments we delight in when the family gathers around and gives us a sense of security, of warmth and joy together. All this would be gone. For these blessings come from God's activity among humanity, from God at work redeeming, reaching out, seeking to arrest the attention of men and women and boys and girls all over the earth. If all that suddenly ceased, life would become incredibly dull and drab and dreary.

Life teaches us that there are times when God does temporarily withdraw his blessing from life and his goodness from us, and invariably life then turns impossible to live. Usually God does this to get our attention, but the utter despair we might feel at times like this, when we see life as dull, drab, lonely and miserable, remind even the most hardened of us that life without joy is barely life at all.

Why? Paul tells us that dull, drab, lonely and miserable is the result of the condition into which we were born. And he says that the only thing which alleviates this is the mercy and grace of God. We would always be dull, drab, lonely and miserable were it not for God's goodness poured out among us, to the just and unjust alike, in his attempt to reach us and arrest us. So these words from verse 4 come to us with great meaning: "But (because of his great love for us) God, (who is rich in mercy), made us alive with Christ (even when we were dead in transgressions)."

Paul is very, very careful to inform us immediately of what it is that moves God to act. It's important to focus on that. The first thing that caused God to act was his love. And his mercy.

I wonder if you understand what mercy is? And especially the difference between mercy and grace. These are terms which we use a lot, but we don't often understand what they mean, and sometimes we use them interchangeably.

It is the guilt of human beings which draws forth the *grace* of God. When God looks at us and sees us as guilty - as actually having made choices and done things which were deliberately wrong when we knew them to be wrong - it calls forth his compassion, expressed in *grace*. Even though we deserve it, he still doesn't want to leave us in our guilt. So his grace is aroused and he reaches out to find a way to set aside the demands of law and to relieve us from the due punishment of our guilt, and to set us free. And he has in fact done that. *It is the grace of God which has dealt with our guilt*.

But it is our misery which calls forth his *mercy*. You parents know how this is. Right now Ben is suffering mightily from severe Vacaville allergies, with a persistent cough, watery eyes, a runny nose and all stuffed up so he can hardly breathe - he is so miserable, and all he can do at times is throw his arms around us and cry - what does that do to you as a parent? Well, it awakens our pity, and we reach out and try to relieve his condition in some way if we possibly can, because his misery has called forth our mercy. That's what Paul says has awakened the mercy of God - the misery of human beings.

And from the last two sermons you understand what Paul has detailed for us in the verses which open chapter 2. He tells us, as a race, we are dead in a helpless, impotent condition. We are corrupt, decaying, and life is on a downward slant. He reminds us we are molded by the world around us, we are gripped by this passion for conformity, and we find it very difficult to break away from the established trend. Our desire not to be different holds us in a kind of bondage.

And we are also controlled by Satan. There is a spirit at work which prompts us to disobey. Our first reaction to any demand almost invariably is one of belligerence. We come to life with a chip on our shoulder, and we are immediately defensive or belligerent. We learn to cover it over, we learn to smile and to be sweet, but inwardly we feel resentment at having to conform to someone else's desires. That's the spirit of disobedience which is constantly at work in humanity, making us strike out and injure one another.

And (if the pressure to conform to the world and the activity of Satan were not enough), there is that whole realm of life which Paul gathers up and calls the 'cravings of our sinful desires.' Our good desires turn into bad drives, with the result that we wrongly re-prioritize life around excess and, again, injure each other, and destroy peace in a household, in a family, in a company, in a nation. And this creates heartache, despair, rejection, discontent, disillusionment, disenchantment, boredom, routine, monotony, frustration.

And you know what? We have this amazing capacity to be aware of all of this with regard to what others do to us, but not be aware of how we are doing the same thing to them. Isn't that amazing? Our image of ourselves is always so much better than what we actually are. But God sees all this realistically, and he says, "That's what's making you so miserable." This kind of condition is everywhere - it's shared with the rest of mankind. God sees the misery and the heartache - the tears, the disappointment, the crushing sense of frustration, of weakness, of inadequacy, the abject misery of human life as it really is - and this is what calls forth God's mercy. It awakens his love to reach out to us. He wants to do something to relieve the misery we humans experience. That is what Paul says is happening.

Let me bring this point home. I believe that husbands have a great deal of difficulty in understanding and acting in response to the command of Scripture to love their wives (Ephesians 5:25; Colossians 3:19), because they don't understand what love is. To most people, love is a kind of feeling, an affectionate feeling, which we do at times have toward our wives, and with which we started the whole process of marriage. But it isn't always there. Nevertheless, husbands are told to love their wives. Yet, if love is nothing but this feeling, this itch around the heart that you can't scratch, this uncertain attitude which is nice to have but isn't always present, then it's impossible to obey that exhortation to love your wife. If we can't just 'call it up,' then why would God command us to love?

The reason is that love isn't an itch around the heart. Rather, love is a will, a choice that you make. Love is an active moving out to meet the needs of someone else. That's why the Bible says, "If any man hunger, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him to drink." Because that is when you love him. You love somebody when you respond to his needs. That's the meaning of love. When a husband begins to meet his wife's needs - to find out who she is, where she is in life, what she wants, and what she needs, and begins to work at supplying those needs - that's when he begins to love his wife. And that's when a wife begins to love her husband.

And THIS is what God is talking about. Paul is saying, "God loved us and he did something about it. He came here." He is not a God of indifference or unconcern. He was touched with our misery and in mercy he came and he wept and he suffered.

I hope you hear this clearly, especially as we move toward celebrating the Lord's Supper this morning. We were dead in our sins and transgressions - there was absolutely nothing in us which could help God in the least degree. We have done nothing to break through the pattern of human misery. You can go back through human history - to the Middle Ages, to the golden age of Greece, to the Persian empire - as far back as you can go, and you will find men and women struggling with exactly the same problems, and feeling exactly the same hurts, with exactly the same abject miseries, all living in a dull, gray world governed by human hatred and fratricide and war, all exactly the same as today.

When we were dead, when we were absolutely hopeless, then God did something. This is what Paul wants us to see. God took action. God broke through. He loved us and did something about it. He came here. That's what we celebrate in Holy Communion this morning.

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